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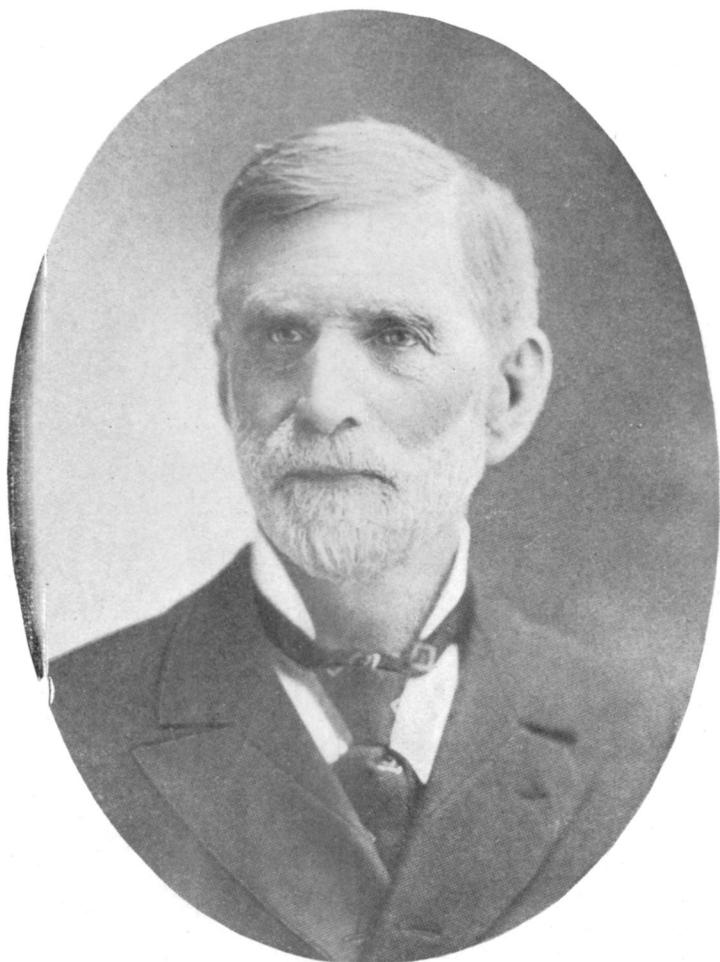
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PAUL SELBY.

THE EDITORIAL CONVENTION OF 1856.

CHICAGO, ILL., Sept. 2, 1912.

Mrs. Jessie Palmer Weber, Secretary of the State Historical Society, Springfield, Ill.:

DEAR MRS. WEBER—In compliance with a request for some recollections of the convention of Anti-Nebraska editors, held at Decatur, on February 22, 1856, which resulted in the State convention at Bloomington on May 29th following, and the formal organization of the Republican party in Illinois, I enclose to you the following article, the substance of which was contributed to the Chicago Daily Tribune and published in that paper February 22, 1906, in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of that event. To this I have made such additions as seem necessary to bring the history down to present date, especially in reference to the passing away of members of the Decatur convention since the anniversary referred to.

Yours truly,

PAUL SELBY.

The convention of Anti-Nebraska editors, which met at Decatur, Ill., Feb. 22, 1856, prepared the way for the Bloomington convention of May following which marked the formal organization of the Republican party in Illinois.

As the outcome of two years of agitation on the subject of an organization to resist the further extension of slavery, following the repeal of the Missouri compromise, there appeared, early in January, 1856, in the editorial columns of the "*Morgan Journal*," a weekly newspaper, at Jacksonville, Ill., a suggestion favoring the holding of a conference of Anti-Nebraska editors of the State to consider and agree upon a

line of policy to be pursued during the approaching campaign. The first indorsement came from the "*Winchester (Ill.) Chronicle*," then under the editorship of the late John Moses, afterwards the private secretary of the first Governor Richard Yates, and still later author of Moses' "*History of Illinois*."

The indorsement of the *Winchester* paper was followed by a similar note of approval from the "*Illinois State Chronicle*," published at Decatur, and on the suggestion of the latter, Decatur was agreed upon as the place and the twenty-second of February—the one hundred and twenty-fourth anniversary of the birth of George Washington—as the date of the proposed meeting.

Another early indorser of the movement was the *Chicago Tribune*, which under the title, "Free State Editorial Convention," made this editorial comment:

"It was moved by the *Morgan Journal* and seconded by the *Winchester Chronicle* that there should be held a convention of free State editors at Decatur on the 22nd of February. The question has met the approval of the *Pike County Free Press* and *Decatur Chronicle* and other papers. The *Morgan Journal* calls on the *Belleville Advocate* and the Anti-Nebraska press generally, from one end of the Prairie State to the other, to express their sentiment on the propriety of the proposed convention."

Then, after quoting still further from the *Pike County Free Press* and the *Morgan Journal*, the *Tribune* adds:

"The reasons set forth by the *Journal* so clearly and well are sufficient. If it be the will of the free State editors to hold such a convention, the *Tribune* will be represented. We need only add that the proposition meets our cordial approbation, and we hope a ready response will be heard from every section of the Prairie State on the part of the editorial corps not bound to swear by Douglas and slavery."

A formal call was issued which bore the indorsement of twenty-five papers, including the *Tribune*, *Staats Zeitung* and *Journal* of Chicago and the *Pike County Free Press*, Pittsfield, then edited by the late John G. Nicolay, afterwards the private secretary and, still later, the biographer, of Abraham Lincoln.

The convention met at the time and place indicated, convening in the parlor of what was then the Cassell house, later the Oglesby house and now St. Nicholas hotel. When they came together the members amounted to a round dozen; a heavy snow storm, which had fallen the night before, blockaded many of the railroads, preventing a number from arriving, although two or three reached town in the evening, but too late to take part in the proceedings. Those present at the opening meeting were:

Dr. Charles H. Ray, *Chicago Tribune*.
 George Schneider, *Chicago Staats Zeitung*.
 V. Y. Ralston, *Quincy Whig*.
 O. P. Wharton, *Rock Island Advertiser*.
 Thomas J. Pickett, *Peoria Republican*.
 E. C. Daugherty, *Rockford Register*.
 E. W. Blaisdell, *Rockford Republican*.
 Charles Faxon, *Princeton Post*.
 A. N. Ford, *Lacon Gazette*.
 B. F. Shaw, *Dixon Telegraph*.
 W. J. Usrey, *Decatur Chronicle*.
 Paul Selby, *Morgan Journal*.

An organization was effected with Paul Selby as chairman and W. J. Usrey, secretary, while Messrs. Ray, Schneider, Ralston, Wharton, Daugherty and Pickett constituted a committee on resolutions, and Messrs. Ford, Faxon and Shaw a committee on credentials. The chief work done by the credentials committee was to exclude a reporter or correspondent of the *St. Louis Republican*, a pro-slavery paper, who tried to obtrude himself upon the convention.

The work done by the convention is indicated by the following quotation from a paper read by the writer at the anniversary celebration held in Bloomington in 1900:

“The most important work of the convention was transacted through the medium of the committee on resolutions. Mr. Lincoln came up from Springfield and was in conference with the committee during the day, and there is reason to believe that the platform, reported by them through Dr. Ray as their Chairman, and adopted by the convention, bears the stamp of his peculiar intellect. * * *

"The platform, while disavowing any intention to interfere in the internal affairs of any State in reference to slavery * * * amounted to an emphatic protest against the introduction of slavery into territory already free, or its further extension; demanded the restoration of the Missouri compromise; insisted upon the maintenance of the doctrine of the Declaration of Independence as essential to freedom of speech and of the press, and that, under it, 'freedom' should be regarded 'as the rule and slavery the exception' * * *; declared in favor of the widest toleration in matters of religion, and for the protection of the common school system, which was a protest again 'know-nothingism,' which had swept over the country within the preceding two years; and concluded with a demand for 'reform in the administration of State government,' as second only in importance to slavery extension itself."

In other words, the platform, while pronounced in opposition to slavery extension, was conservatively Republican, recognizing the rights of the slave States under the constitution as it then existed, as Abraham Lincoln did up to the hour when emancipation became a necessity in the prosecution of the war for the preservation of the Union.

One of the most important acts of the convention, because far-reaching in its results, was the adoption of an independent resolution recommending the holding of a State convention at Bloomington, on May 29 following, and appointing a State central committee, consisting of one member for each of the nine congressional districts, and two for the State at large. The following were the members of the Central committee named, the first nine being in the order of their districts:

S. M. Church, Rockford; W. B. Ogden, Chicago; G. D. A. Parks, Joliet; T. J. Pickett, Peoria; Edward A. Dudley, Quincy; W. H. Herndon, Springfield; R. J. Oglesby, Decatur; Joseph Gillespie, Edwardsville; D. L. Phillips, Jonesboro, with Gustavus Koerner, Belleville, and Ira O. Wilkinson, Rock Island, for the State at large.

All these, except three, united in calling the Bloomington convention—the exceptions being W. B. Ogden, who declined on account of absence from the State, and whose place was filled by Dr. John Evans, afterwards Territorial Governor of Colorado; R. J. Oglesby, who left on a tour in foreign lands and who was succeeded by Col. I. C. Pugh of

Decatur; and Gustavus Koerner, then Lieutenant Governor, who thought the time had not arrived for the organization of a new party.

A number of errors in regard to the personnel of the convention have crept into what purport to be State histories or personal biographies, one writer claiming that the convention consisted of a mixed assemblage of some twenty persons—not all editors; another that the late John M. Palmer¹ and other outsiders were present, while at least one State history gives an erroneous list of the members of the State central committee appointed. As a matter of fact, the only outsider admitted to the deliberations of the convention was Abraham Lincoln, and his relations were chiefly with the committee on resolutions during its deliberations.

In the evening the editors were made the recipients of a banquet tendered them by the citizens of Decatur, the event taking place in the Cassell house. Richard J. Oglesby, then a young lawyer of Decatur, presided and made a welcoming address, while Mr. Lincoln was the principal speaker at the table. Commenting upon the future policy of the new party, and replying to a suggestion of his name as a candidate for Governor at the coming election, he gave an illustration of his characteristic unselfishness and foresight by advocating the nomination of an Anti-Nebraska Democrat, on the ground that such a nomination would secure a larger number of votes than that of an old-line Whig like himself, finally naming Col. William H. Bissell as the proper man for the place.

This illustrated the spirit of those who were then connected with the efforts for the organization of a new party based on the principles of human freedom. While there were, undoubtedly, those among them who entertained personal aspirations, there was no one who was merely seeking to build up a "machine" within the party organization, in the hope of being able to dominate the whole for his own personal advantage and that of a combination of which he hoped to be the recognized chief.

The mass of those engaged in the movement were looking, first of all, for the public good. The self-seeking politician of to-day, who,

¹ This convention has been confused with the Republican State convention of 1860, which met at Decatur and nominated Richard Yates for Governor. Gen. John M. Palmer was a member of this convention of 1860.—*Editor.*

while trusting to his faction to boost him into power, imagines himself a second Lincoln because Lincoln believed in and advocated organization, betrays a childish misconception of the character and lofty patriotism of the man who saved the nation and emancipated a race at the cost of his own life.

The first Republican State convention was held at Bloomington at the date named at Decatur, and the plan suggested by Lincoln of placing William H. Bissell at the head of the State ticket was carried out.¹ There it was that Lincoln delivered one of the most memorable and inspiring speeches of his life, and his judgment was vindicated by the people at the polls in November following.

A little personal history may not be out of place here. Of the twelve editors constituting that little group at Decatur on February 22, 1856, eleven have passed away.

Virgil Y. Ralston, of the *Quincy Whig*, after serving as captain in an Illinois regiment in the Civil War, and later in an Iowa regiment, broken in health, died in a hospital at St. Louis in 1864. Dr. Charles H. Ray, retired from the *Chicago Tribune* in 1863, but later, returning to journalism, spent the last three years of his life as editor of the *Chicago Evening Post*, dying September 23, 1870. T. J. Pickett, editor of the *Peoria Republican*, 1856, in his later years, was engaged in newspaper work in Nebraska, but died at Ashland, in that State, December 24, 1891. A. N. Ford died at an advanced age at Lacon, Ill., in 1892. W. J. Usrey, one of the most active members of the convention, a veteran of both the Mexican and Civil wars and twice appointed postmaster of the city of Decatur, died in his home city January 20, 1894. E. C. Daugherty, of the *Rockford Register*, retired from business on account of declining health in 1865, and died, I think, in California, soon after, but the exact date I have not learned. Charles Faxon, of the *Princeton Post*, after the war spent some time as a government employe at Washington, where, according to the best information I have been able to

¹ An incident worthy of mention in this connection was the manner of Bissell's nomination. After a delegate from Madison county had moved that there be no formal nomination, but that the convention merely confirm the nomination "which the people had already made" and after the reading of a letter from Col. Bissell announcing that he would not decline the nomination if tendered him, but preferred that the honor should fall upon some one else, the convention report adds: "The entire convention arose and with nine, long, loud and hearty cheers, declared that the nomination of Col. William H. Bissell by the people of Illinois, as their candidate for governor, was then and there confirmed."

secure, he died—date unknown. E. W. Blaisdell, of the *Rockford Republican*, remained a citizen of Rockford, where he became prominent in the ranks of the Democratic party, dying a few years ago. George Schneider spent the last thirty years of his life in the banking business, was overtaken by disaster, and died in Colorado on September 16, 1905. Benjamin F. Shaw, for fifty years editor or proprietor of the *Dixon Telegraph*, and during different periods occupant of various public offices, including that of postmaster of his home city for the last fourteen years of his life, died there September 18, 1909. Oliver P. Wharton, a Civil war veteran and in after years connected with the newspaper business at different points in the State of Ohio, spent his last years in virtual retirement in California, has been the eleventh to pass away, dying in the Soldiers' Home near Los Angeles, that state, May 18, 1912. With honor to the memory of those who have passed to the other shore, and as sole survivor,

PAUL SELBY.

THE ILLINOIS AND NATIONAL MOVEMENT SIMULTANEOUS.

It is worthy of note that, on the same day this little gathering of Anti-Nebraska editors was in session at Decatur, a similar body of representatives was in conference in Pittsburg, Pa., for the purpose of "perfecting the national organization and providing for a national delegate convention of the Republican party."

In the list of those present at Pittsburg appear such historic names as those of Francis P. Blair, Sr., of Maryland, who presided over the deliberations of the convention; Zachariah Chandler, K. S. Bingham and Jacob M. Howard of Michigan; Edward D. Morgan, Preston and John A. King and Horace Greeley of New York; Judge E. R. Hoar of Massachusetts; David Wilmot of Pennsylvania; Joshua F. Giddings of Ohio; Oliver P. Morton of Indiana, and Owen Lovejoy of Illinois.

Out of the measures inaugurated at Pittsburg came the Republican National Convention at Philadelphia in June following, which nominated the first Republican candidates for president and vice-president.

And thus, it will be seen, the new party in Illinois started in its career abreast of the national organization.